

Tudor Georgescu. *The Eugenic Fortress: The Transylvanian Saxon Experiment in Interwar Romania.* CEU Press Studies in the History of Medicine Series. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016. 240 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-963-386-139-4.

Reviewed by Sacha Davis

Published on H-Nationalism (June, 2017)

Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

In examining the interwar Transylvanian Saxon eugenics movement, Tudor Georgescu presents “a particularly enticing case study of an ethnic minority’s embrace of eugenics in the name of international salvation” (p. 6). The author contributes to the expanding field of work on eugenics outside America, Britain, and Germany, and especially the increasing interest in East European eugenics. While most eugenics studies focus on cases empowered by nation-states, few have examined ethnic minorities pursuing independent or competing eugenic agendas. Georgescu offers the Saxon case study as a model against which to investigate how other minorities responded to, and sometimes advanced, the rise of biological determinism more generally. The particular significance of the Saxon case study is that it sought practical means to implement its eugenic policies. Saxon eugenicists responded to their minority status and strong assimilatory pressures with an increasingly radical eugenic discourse that sought the support of a complementary fascist movement (the Self-Help movement) in the 1920s.

The author divides the history of Saxon eugenics into a formative period from 1885 to 1918, a period of increasing politicization and radicalization from 1918 to 1940, and *Gleichschaltung* in

the service of the Third Reich from 1940 to 1944. While chapters 1 and 6 briefly describe the first and last period respectively, Georgescu’s emphasis is on the interwar period. He traces the career trajectories and eugenic visions of three key individuals: Heinrich Siegmund, a medical doctor who attempted to foster the nascent eugenics movement through the principle Saxon institution, the Lutheran Church; Pastor Alfred Csallner, who switched his focus from action through the church to embracing the Self-Help movement; and Wilhelm Schunn, who under the banner of Self-Help implemented a far-reaching eugenics program through his network of National “Neighborhoods.” At the same time, the author provides an institutional history of the organizations through which Heinrich, Csallner, and Schunn pursued their eugenic aims. Schunn’s Neighborhoods especially provide “a truly remarkable case study of how an ethnic minority strove to bypass its host state in a quest to cast an ever-wider eugenic net over its body politic” (p. 6). Georgescu seeks to identify and define Saxon eugenic discourse in terms of its ideological imperatives and available means, and the extent to which these changed with Self-Help’s rise to prominence.

Chapter 1 briefly introduces the key individuals of the Saxon eugenics movement and outlines

the development of Saxon eugenics prior to the First World War. Particular attention is given to Siegmund's groundbreaking role in fostering eugenics in Transylvania, with his firm emphasis on action through the Welfare Office of the Church. The chapter outlines Siegmund's, Csallner's, and Schunn's eugenic visions, highlighting their disagreements, such as Siegmund and Csallner's dispute over the role of land loss in limiting Malthusian population growth, and Csallner's obsessive interest in genealogy determining individuals' qualities and life success. Chapter 1 also introduces the clerical and political organizations through which the eugenicists sought to act.

Chapter 2 makes a more detailed analysis of Csallner's views of Saxon demographics, laying the groundwork for the following chapter on his efforts to institutionalize his eugenic theories. Where Siegmund emphasized land loss as driving decline, Csallner focused on the perceived declining biological quality of the Saxon community. Having a rather "strained and selective" understanding of biological heredity (p. 94), Csallner believed this decline to be driven primarily by the low birth rate among the most "valuable" members of society (a judgment he based on socioeconomic and education factors). To Csallner's mind, intermarriage with non-Saxons further contributed to this decline. His solution was to encourage biologically "valuable" individuals to have more children, and to consolidate Saxon holdings as a barrier to the further penetration of "Saxon" communities by Romanians and other non-Saxons. He supported his theories with extensive surveys of birth rates by profession and socioeconomic status, as well as figures on rates of mixed marriages (although he provided no evidence to support his assertions of the "inferiority" of children of mixed parentage). These surveys, Georgescu suggests, provide a wealth of data for historical analysis of the interwar period.

Chapter 3 examines Csallner's attempts to find institutional frameworks through which to

enact his policies. A Lutheran pastor, Csallner initially lobbied the church to adopt his measures. However, the cash-strapped church lacked the resources to support Csallner's eugenic proposals, which often sat uneasily with Lutheran theology. From the late 1920s, however, Csallner increasingly turned instead to the fascist Self-Help movement, and his policy proposals took increasingly dogmatic and totalitarian forms. Thus, having begun committed to the church, the only body in the 1920s that could implement his ideas, Csallner switched in the 1930s to embracing fascism, the ideology of the one political organization that could implement his eugenics schemes. In this regard, Georgescu argues, Csallner's trajectory was typical of the many clerics involved in Saxon eugenics. The Self-Help movement provided the basis for a number of eugenics institutions: the Self-Help Race Office (1932-35), the National Department for Statistics, Population Policy and Genealogy (1935-38), and the National Office for Statistics and Genealogy (1938-41). Each took more detailed forms of data collection, which again provide valuable sources for future research. However, internal conflict within the fascist movement prevented many of Csallner's projects from full implementation, culminating in the dissolution of the Office for Statistics and Genealogy and the pulping of much of his work.

Chapter 4 charts the rise of the indigenous Saxon Self-Help movement across three phases: its slow, gradual evolution from 1922 to 1929 as a book club and mutual society, its rapid diversification of membership and radicalization from 1929 to 1932, and its rise to dominate the formulation of a new Saxon National Program in 1933. Following a quick examination of the myths that formed around its leader Fritz Fabritius, Georgescu argues that the Self-Help movement decried the "degeneration" of Saxons from its formation, seeking eugenic reform alongside land reform, ideological consciousness raising, and opposition to international capitalism. Eugenics played an increasingly prominent role in Self-Help publications from

1927 onward—the year Siegmund joined Self-Help. Self-Help further transformed from 1929, when it combined with Csallner's eugenics society (the Society of Child Enthusiasts), as well as various youth groups. This ideologically driven growth greatly diversified its previously predominantly working-class membership, and brought into the organization new, more radical leadership. Georgescu charts Self-Help's increasing politicization, forming the National Socialist Self-Help Movement of Germans in Romania (NSDR) in 1932 to compete in elections. The author emphasizes Self-Help's indigenous origins, arguing persuasively that while Self-Help adopted the "National Socialist Franchise" in 1932 (p. 5), its policies remained predominantly local in origin. Finally, in 1933, the NSDR successfully forced the conservative Saxon political National Council (*Volksrat*) to adopt a new Saxon National Program, reflecting Self-Help's emphasis on internal regeneration, isolationism from the state, and eugenic reform.

Chapter 5 examines the Self-Help movement in power from 1933 to 1940, and its pursuit of increasingly extensive eugenics programs. Despite the state banning the NSDR in 1933, and its successor organization, the National Renewal Movement of Germans in Romania (NEDR), less than a year later, the Self-Help movement successfully took control of the Saxon National Council and in 1935 installed Fabritius as president of the Association of Germans in Romania, representing Romania's various German communities. However, more radical members of Self-Help challenged Fabritius's leadership in 1935, provoking an internal "civil war" that was only resolved with Berlin's mediation in 1938. These internal divisions also hindered the data collection work of Csallner, as discussed above.

Schunn, Csallner's immediate supervisor as commissioner for the Nation's Organic Constitution, appears to have faced less interference in the creation of his National Neighborhoods. These

associations were the most remarkable achievements of interwar Saxon eugenics, and highlight the ability of the Saxons to implement eugenics policies despite their lack of statehood. Based loosely on older Saxon neighborhood associations banned by the Hungarian government before the First World War—the date is alternatively given as 1871 and 1891 (pp. 81, 220)—Schunn's associations also grouped together Saxon families in a given urban suburb (or less frequently, district) for mutual aid and support. However, under Schunn, the Neighborhoods sought to fence Saxon society on ethnic lines, and regulate every aspect of Saxon social, economic, educational, eugenic and race hygienic, medical, and ultimately political life. They were pivotal in Self-Help's efforts to reform the Saxon community. The Neighborhoods were "suffused with a sense of re-enchanting public time and space, spawning a system of sacred geographies and symbols that legitimised their authority and grounded the Self-Help's project to reconnect with the historic in an alternative modernity" (p. 221). Membership of the Neighborhoods offered community support; exclusion from the community constituted their most powerful method of coercion for those who failed to meet imaginary moral and racial bars.

Georgescu has identified a wealth of material generated by the Neighborhoods (in excess of five hundred individual files) and of necessity does not examine them exhaustively; this is one of a number of future directions for research that he identifies. Instead, he focuses on very substantial payments (raised by monthly donation drives) for fourth and more children born to eugenically and racially "healthy" families. While it remains unclear whether medical certificates demonstrating eugenic value were required in practice, Georgescu argues that the payment system enabled Self-Help to institutionalize a biological definition of Saxonness. Members of ethnically mixed marriages (and individuals of Jewish ancestry) were excluded from the Neighborhoods, although Georgescu notes that these measures largely

failed to prevent intermarriage in the first place. The author also makes a brief case study of recipients of the payments, arguing that poor, recent rural migrants to urban centers received most of the “honourary payments” for large families, and that the proceeds were mainly used to purchase housing or pay debt, thereby contributing to national consolidation of the community as intended by Schunn. In the Neighborhoods, Georgescu has identified a remarkable case of eugenic action by a small ethnic minority, and well meriting further study.

The final chapter briefly outlines events after 1940, when the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (Coordination Centre for Ethnic Germans) installed Andreas Schmidt as leader of the newly formed National Socialist German Workers Party of the German National Group in Romania, opening the way for the *Gleichschaltung* of Romanian Germans, the wholesale importation of institutions and methodology from Germany, and the steady removal of most of the key interwar eugenicists from positions of power. Thus, the author argues, the period 1940-44 marks a sharp break from the methodology of the interwar indigenous eugenics movement, even if many of the aims remained unchanged.

In addition to the topics for future study mentioned above, this volume invites further research in a number of areas. The author highlights these lacunae for the attention of future researchers. These include direct comparisons of Self-Help with the fascism of other interwar ethnic minorities, as well as of Self-Help’s youth wing, the Self-Help Workers Team SAM, with the Romanian Legionnaires, and the proliferation of positions with overlapping jurisdictions in Self-Help as a comparison to the overlapping jurisdictions in National Socialist Germany itself. The author suggests that eugenics and fascism offer opportunities for further study of the extensive transfer networks between Saxons on the one hand, and Germans in Germany, Austria, and other regions on the other

(a subject partially addressed in this volume), especially compared to the almost complete lack of transference between Saxons and other (Romanian, Hungarian) eugenicists in the region. Finally, Georgescu does not consider Saxon eugenics through the lens of gender, a theme that would have been of considerable interest, especially given the extensive role of the Neighborhoods in governing communal and family life. The book is nonetheless impressive in its broad scope; these absences are invitations to further research rather than weaknesses.

I was less persuaded by Georgescu’s claim that the Self-Help movement’s commitment to pan-Germanism in Romania marked the resolution of the long debate in Saxon circles whether to embrace a *klein-Sächsisch* or *all-Deutsch* German nationalism. The degree to which Self-Help embodied an *all-Deutsch* nationalism is not always clear; it remained Saxon-centric and frequently struggled to establish its institutions in other communities. For example, Self-Help had only limited success establishing its Neighborhoods outside Transylvania. It is also striking that Self-Help branches in other German communities formed the bases of support for the radical faction to challenge Fabritius’s leadership during Self-Help’s “civil war.” Saxon eugenicists were similarly divided between their rhetorical commitment to pan-German nationalism and their Saxon-centrism. Strikingly, Csallner objected to upper-class Saxon men “importing” wives from Germany and Austria, as this undermined Saxon biological quality by leaving superior Saxon women without suitably high-status partners (p. 97). The rhetorical commitment of fascists and eugenicists to *all-Deutsch* nationalism is clear; the abandonment of *klein-Sächsisch* policies is less obvious.

Overall, however, Georgescu persuasively demonstrates that an interwar ethnic minority could pursue an ambitious eugenic agenda without statehood (and even with state opposition). The trajectory of Csallner’s career illustrates the

reorientation of Saxon eugenics from a church-centric to a party-centric discourse. While the church necessarily remained central to eugenic discourse due to its social significance and infrastructure, Saxon eugenicists embraced Saxon fascism as the natural route for implementing national renewal. The author also demonstrates that Self-Help's embracement of eugenics as quintessential tools for regeneration was not merely rhetorical; the Neighborhoods represented a remarkably ambitious bioengineering project. Saxon eugenics provide an excellent case study for comparison to other interwar ethnic minorities that might have done the same.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

Citation: Sacha Davis. Review of Georgescu, Tudor. *The Eugenic Fortress: The Transylvanian Saxon Experiment in Interwar Romania*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49769>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.